

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing on “The SARS Threat: Is the Nation’s Public Health Network Prepared for
a Possible Epidemic?”
April 9, 2003

Good morning. I would like to welcome everyone to today’s oversight hearing on our public health system’s response capabilities at the Federal, state, and local level to manage an emerging infectious disease. The global outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, provides a valid test of the nation’s preparedness to handle any public health threat, whether it is caused by a naturally occurring infectious outbreak or a bioterrorist attack. The Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act provided substantial new funding for states, localities, and hospitals to boost preparedness to respond to a highly contagious disease. The SARS threat is the first challenge to our nation’s health network’s capabilities and provides us with a chance to evaluate existing procedures and safeguards.

SARS has brought fear and confusion to everyone’s lives, particularly international travelers, airline crews, and health care workers. There is no known cure and the disease is easily communicable. In a precautionary effort to prevent further spread of the disease, President Bush signed an executive order, on Friday, April 4th, authorizing the use of quarantine if necessary. The President’s unprecedented actions prove how serious the threat of a SARS epidemic is to our country.

SARS is believed to have originated in China in the fall of 2002 and has since spread to 17 countries. As of today, there have been over 2,600 SARS cases reported worldwide, with 98 deaths. In the U.S., the number of reported cases continues to rise. Today, this country has approximately 148 suspected cases in 30 different states, with the highest concentration in New York and California. Fortunately, no deaths have been reported.

We actually have seen two suspected cases of SARS nearby in Northern Virginia. I am pleased that we will hear testimony today from the Director of the Loudoun County Health Department, who was responsible for the treatment of a SARS patient in early February.

It is important for our nation’s public health infrastructure to recognize what lessons can be learned from the SARS threat. This is the first test of our nation’s preparedness and highlights the importance of strong cooperation and partnerships among different health agencies at all levels. The threat of a public health disaster emphasizes the need for planning and practice. The quicker the health community responds, the quicker a prevention and control strategy can be developed and appropriate treatments can be identified. We must first recognize if any deficiencies in coordination, communication, and capacity exist and then begin to work towards improvements

necessary for preparedness. In order to be adequately prepared, we should always be expecting the unexpected.

We have a great selection of witnesses to provide testimony this morning. Secretary Thompson is going to provide the very latest information on this virus and will discuss efforts being taken at the Federal level to respond to SARS. Secretary Thompson will also describe preparedness coordination efforts with state and local authorities.

Joining us on our second panel will be Ms. Janet Heinrich, the Director of Public Health Issues for GAO. She will discuss the GAO report that was released this week regarding state and local preparedness in the event of a bioterrorism attack. This GAO report is timely and very applicable to the current SARS threat. Dr. Margaret Hamburg, former Commissioner of Health for the City of New York, recently co-chaired an Institute of Medicine committee that produced a noteworthy report on microbial threats to health. This report served as the cornerstone for a public health approach to infectious and communicable diseases. And finally, Dr. Goodfriend, Director of the Loudoun County Health Department, will be sharing with us his experience with the region's first suspected case of SARS. He will also provide us with his assessment of state and local public health departments' ability to respond adequately to an emerging disease such as SARS.

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